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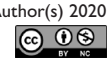

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Lonely, Poor, and Ugly? How Cultural Practices and Forms of Capital Relate to Physical Unattractiveness

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Abstract

Physical attractiveness is increasingly framed as a meritocratic good that involves individual benefits, such as higher wages or success in the partner market. Investing in one's physical appearance is thereby seen as a means to increase one's human capital. While the positive effects are well documented, its counterpart, the dark side of physical appearance, has received much less attention from social science research. This article sheds light on the negative effects of physical appearance using a theoretical framework based on the cultural sociology of Bourdieu, integrating both structure and agency perspectives. Using data from the German General Social Survey (ALLBUS) from 2014, we demonstrate that unattractiveness is socially stratified by economic, cultural, and social capital. The article highlights the relevance of cultural factors (e.g. forms of cultural capital and cultural practices) for the analysis of the interplay between physical appearance and stratification as well as the relevance of physical appearance for cultural sociology.

Keywords

Attractiveness, habitus, cultural capital, cultural practices, economic capital, social capital

Introduction

Unattractiveness is a central but largely overlooked dimension of social and cultural inequality. Although research on physical appearance has gained attention in the social sciences in recent years, the focus of most studies is restricted to the positive effects of attractiveness on economic success (e.g. income, labour market inclusion, etc.) and in the partner market (e.g. finding a mate, reproductive success, etc.). The findings are usually

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rhetorically framed in a positive manner. This implies that physical attractiveness constitutes a natural hierarchy, which is either not linked to stratification at all or is even a legitimate advantage in social life. In this context, people are increasingly summoned to invest in their physical attractiveness as physical human capital—that is, another form of self-optimisation.

A central goal of this article is to reject this assumption and to turn to the dark side of physical attractiveness. Physical attractiveness is not just an ancillary natural advantage; it is ascriptive and non-meritocratic. Like all forms of discrimination, the positive effects can be beneficial for some, but the negative effects are serious and contradict basic normative ideas of how inequalities should be justified in modern societies. This article investigates such negative effects of one's physical appearance theoretically within the framework of the cultural sociology of Pierre Bourdieu and empirically with special data on cultural practices from the German General Social Survey (ALLBUS 2014, see GESIS, 2015). (see GESIS, 2015).

Most studies so far have investigated the effects of attractiveness on income inequality, especially the positive effects of being attractive on individual income, while recent studies have increased the focus on agency and practices of "doing beauty" (Schunck, 2016). Drawing on the cultural theory of Bourdieu, we aim to integrate these different perspectives ("agency perspectives", "structure perspectives", and the focus on inequality) in a single theoretical framework with a special focus on the link between unattractiveness, stratification, and culture. Our central argument goes as follows: as a central dimension of the habitus, one's physical appearance affects the life-course from early childhood onward. Therefore, focusing on the effect of unattractiveness on stratification does not necessarily preclude a focus on the investment in avoiding unattractiveness. Thus, we aim to integrate the different perspectives within a single theoretical model. This theoretical framework sheds light on another aspect of unattractiveness that is largely overseen so far, especially in empirical research—the role of cultural factors such as cultural capital and cultural practices. From this perspective, the article raises three explorative research questions:

Research Question 1: How do forms of capital and cultural practices affect unattractiveness?

Research Question 2: How does unattractiveness affect stratification, especially the distribution of forms of capital?

Research Question 3: What is the role of forms of cultural capital and cultural practices in this configuration?

To approach these questions empirically, we use data from the German General Social Survey with a special thematic focus on cultural practices that includes a rating of the attractiveness of respondents (ALLBUS, 2014; N = 3300 – see GESIS, 2015). On the level of large-scale population surveys, it is still quite rare that a rating of attractiveness is included at all. Therefore, the combination of such a rating with the special focus on cultural factors is of high explorative value for this area of research, even though the data is restricted to one country (Germany).

The argumentation is structured as follows: in the following, main section we present our theoretical framework by (a) turning to the dark side of physical appearance and (b) integrating previous research that focuses on either the agency-perspective or the structure-perspective. This leads us to (c) the integration of cultural practices and forms of capital theoretically and empirically. The third section presents our data, operationalisation, and methods. The fourth section discusses the findings with a special focus on the role of cultural factors and gender differences. We conclude by suggesting future tasks for research on unattractiveness from the perspective of comparative cultural sociology.

A Sociocultural Approach to Unattractiveness

The Dark Side of Physical Appearance

In the social sciences, we find evidence from different times and different societies for the fact that humans constantly try to influence their physical appearance. While the definition of what is perceived as beautiful differs across time and space, all cultures support specific practices to create and preserve what they call beauty. Surprisingly, it was not until the 1970s that physical attractiveness came to the fore of the social sciences. Dion et al. (1972) showed that physical attractiveness and ascription of positive characteristics were associated ("what is beautiful is good"). Since then, numerous studies have shown the general sociological relevance of physical appearance. Most importantly, attractiveness not only leads to a more positive attribution of personal characteristics by others but is also associated with higher social status (Webster and Driskell, 1983). Jæger (2011) found that physical appearance impacts socioeconomic and marital outcomes throughout the lifespan. Other studies elaborated on the association between attractiveness and income (Hamermesh and Biddle, 1994; Harper, 2000; Hosoda et al., 2003; Judge et al., 2009; Pfeifer, 2012) as well as other job-related outcomes, such as job security (Commisso and Finkelstein, 2012), the evaluation of performance and competencies (Hamermesh and Parker, 2005), success (Hamermesh, 2011), or even the outcome of political elections (Rosar et al., 2012). Physical attractiveness is considered to be of fundamental importance in social life and to have overall positive effects (Langlois et al., 2000). Even the debate between psychology, evolutionary biology, and social constructivist approaches (see DeLamater and Hyde, 1998) focuses largely on such positive effects of attractiveness.

Beside all these positive effects, there is obviously a dark side of physical appearance that has not received as much attention. People who are perceived as less attractive seem to exhibit several serious disadvantages in the social world, such as difficulties with finding a partner (Borland and Leigh, 2014; O'Sullivan and Vannier, 2013; Schmitz, 2016) or having fewer children (Jokela, 2009), and these effects seem to differ according to gender (e.g. see Agthe et al., 2010).

In this context, it is important that physical appearance has no social value per se but rather has to be recognised, perceived, evaluated, and classified in social practice by social agents to produce social effects. Therefore, the irreconcilable antagonism between essentialism and social constructivism (for an overview see DeLamater and Hyde, 1998) seems to be misleading. In *Distinction*, Bourdieu (1984: 193) assumes that beauty is not

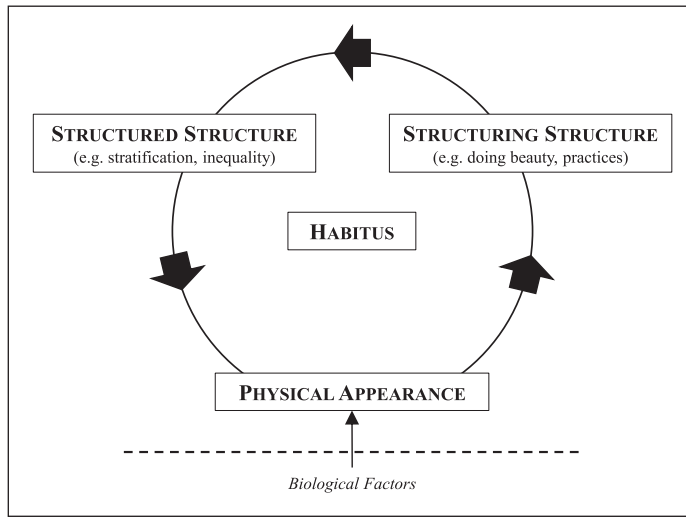

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework.

entirely determined by class and that biological factors exist and might even interfere with the social order[1]. This is not a contradictory notion (cf. Mears, 2015: 23) as physical attractiveness is still considered to be fundamentally linked to social forces. Therefore, to admit that biological dispositions play a certain role does not say much about the complex classifications of physical appearance in social practice (see Figure 1).

Agency, Structure, and Inequality

From this theoretical perspective, we assume that people try to influence their physical appearance *and* that their appearance influences the ability to accumulate capital, while both perspectives are linked to inequality, stratification, and cultural practices. However, most of the existing research is focused on the effects of physical appearance on inequality, while the effects of inequality on physical appearance have received significantly less attention (Schunck, 2016).

Hakim's (2010) concept of erotic capital focuses on the agency of investment in physical appearance. She conceptualises erotic capital as a form of capital in its own right, distinct from economic, cultural, and social capital (2010: 499, 512). Unlike other feminists who criticise beauty norms for the oppression and harm that they inflict on women (see Jeffreys, 2005), Hakim argues that beauty is women's main weapon vis-à-vis men, and that they should use it strategically. She builds her argumentation on findings regarding gendered exchange of sex and economic power (see Buss, 1989). Hakim claims that attractiveness is a fundamentally democratic and meritocratic form of capital that could outbalance existing power asymmetries between social groups as it is supposed to be distributed randomly and depends on the amount of work that is invested (Hakim, 2010: 506). She attributes a subversive character to physical attractiveness that is a chance for marginalised groups to transcend existing boundaries of social class and status. She

writes: "Erotic capital is distinctive in not being controlled by social class and status, and has a subversive character" (Hakim, 2010: 510).

The concept of erotic capital accentuates the focus on agency and the embodied character of capital. However, without a systematic link to the concept of habitus, (erotic) capital is overemphasised as a strategic resource, as bodily human capital (for women) that is not linked to stratification (for a critique of this "strategy" see Green, 2013). In this context, Martin and George (2016: 126) argue that attractiveness is already included in other forms of incorporated capital, especially in forms of cultural capital (see Schmitz, 2016 for empirical evidence that supports this argument). However, when Hakim states that erotic capital is not linked to stratification, she actually refers to the fact that agency is not stratified (and therefore is meritocratic). On the other hand, she obviously assumes that erotic capital can affect stratification as she claims that women may use their attractiveness to climb the social ladder. In this regard, the concept implies a traditional understanding of agency as structuring inequality, but not itself as structured by inequality.

Bourdieu introduced the concept of habitus exactly to overcome the divide between structure and agency (1977, 1990: 52–65; Wacquant, 2006. See also Lizardo 2004): "Of all the oppositions that artificially divide social science," he wrote in the *Logic of Practice* (Bourdieu, 1990: 25), "the most fundamental, and the most ruinous, is the one that is set up between subjectivism and objectivism." As "schemes of perception, thought and action" the habitus incorporates and expresses experiences from the past (Bourdieu, 1990: 54). In this context, individual preferences are conceptualised as the result of primary and secondary socialisation, and thus habitus indicates the specific social position of an individual or group within the social space (cf. Forchtner and Schneickert, 2016: 295). This position is due to one's "capital-configuration" (Bourdieu, 1986)—that is, capital volume and capital structure as well as individual and collective habitus. The theory assumes that individuals with similar social positions in the social space share similar patterns of classification, preferences, and lifestyles, patterns of which social agents are not fully conscious (Bourdieu, 1984: 174). The idea of an incorporation of social structures and embodied forms of experience form the basis of and the link between the concepts of habitus and capital. Both concepts are fundamentally tied to one's body, as Bourdieu notes:

> The relation to the body is a fundamental dimension of the *habitus* that is inseparable from a relation to language and to time . . . It cannot be reduced to a 'body image' or even 'body concept' . . . a subjective representation largely based on the representation of one's own body produced and returned by others . . . The body believes in what it plays at: it weeps if it mimes grief. It does not represent what it performs, it does not memorize the past, it enacts the past, bringing it back to life. What is 'learned by body' is not something that one has, like knowledge that can be brandished, but something that one is. (Bourdieu, 1990: 72–3)

From this perspective, capital—particularly in its incorporated forms—is not (only) a conscious and intentional strategic resource, but linked to one's habitus and position in the social space. Therefore, introducing agency to the analysis of physical appearance does not necessarily preclude the effects of social inequality (see Degele, 2004) because agency does not imply that all social action is conscious, rational, and strategic. The concept of habitus replaces this dualism and is defined as "systems of durable,

transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures" (Bourdieu, 1990: 53). In short, agency is not opposed to structure, as it is itself structured (Lenger et al., 2013; Lizardo, 2004). The notion of the habitus as "structured structure" *and* "structuring structure" implies that individual dispositions and capital configurations are constantly modified in a self-reinforcing process during the lifespan (Bourdieu, 1990; and see Wacquant, 2006). One's physical appearance facilitates further accumulation (or loss) of different forms of capital that can be used to further improve (or harm) physical appearance (Figure 1). As physical appearance is by definition closely tied to recognition by others, being less attractive is associated with a lack or even a penalty of symbolic capital in the specific cultural framework. Therefore, social actors usually try to actively avoid such negative social effects. As being perceived as less attractive becomes socially more important, it seems rational that people increasingly invest in their appearance (Kwan and Trautner, 2009). From a Bourdieusian perspective, such investments are, however, not restricted to the economic dimension. This shifts the focus to the role of cultural capital and cultural practices.

Cultural Practices and Forms of Cultural Capital

Current research on attractiveness is, so far, still largely focused on economic capital, equating success and upward mobility with material gains (e.g. in income, job opportunities, etc.). Although physical attractiveness has not been center stage in research on distinction and tastes (Kuipers, 2015), "the basic assumption of the 'cultural capital' perspective is that aesthetic judgment is guided by an overarching habitus" (2015: 40). We therefore expect cultural practices and cultural capital to be highly relevant for practices of "doing beauty" (Degele, 2004) or "beauty work" (Kwan and Trautner, 2009). But cultural practices that avoid unattractiveness cannot be reduced to buying makeup, plastic surgery, and the like. Kuipers (2015) shows that highbrow aesthetics are applied to more fields than the high arts. If physical appearance is evaluated based on the same dispositional patterns (habitus) that are used to perceive all aesthetic objects, the analysis of unattractiveness is a case for cultural sociology.

Following this argument, the question arises of how physical attractiveness relates to other forms of (cultural) capital. Furthermore, some scholars argue that status gains from physical attractiveness are a form of symbolic capital itself (Anderson et al., 2010; Schmitz, 2016: 88). This points out why the dark side of physical attractiveness is of such fundamental relevance for one's social life, as Bourdieu notes:

> The social world gives what is rarest, recognition, consideration, in other words, quite simply, reasons for being . . . Conversely, there is no worse dispossession, no worse privation, perhaps, than that of the losers in the symbolic struggle for recognition, for access to a socially recognized social being, in a word, to humanity . . . Although it is the product of subjective acts of donation of meaning . . . this symbolic power, charm, seduction, charisma, appears endowed with an objective reality, as if determining the gazes which produce it. (Bourdieu, 2000: 240–241)

Kuipers (2015: 41) specifies this point further referring not only to the relational aspect of physical appearance but to the holistic character of the perception by others. She argues that judging beauty is so fundamentally influenced by gender norms that the classification of physical appearance always includes the evaluation of a person as a "proper man" or a "proper woman." The classification of unattractiveness therefore aims at the person as a whole—at his or her habitus. This theoretical point has methodological implications as well and it explains why measuring physical appearance is quite complicated, especially in highly standardised quantitative research (see a more detailed discussion in the methods section). Since physical appearance is by definition bound to the perception of others, it is not an attribute of the person her- or himself but rather established between individuals. From this perspective, the interviewer who rates the attractiveness has to be (re-)introduced to the analysis, theoretically and empirically. On the level of methods, we deal with this issue quite conventionally—at least from an empirical quantitative perspective—using interviewer fixed effects to control for the differences in rating unattractiveness. Nonetheless, the theoretical model suggested here, does not imply that these interviewer effects are just subjective distortions of an (otherwise) objective measurement.

The Theoretical Model

Figure 2 summarises our theoretical framework. We have argued in favour of, (1) focusing on the dark side of physical appearance ("unattractiveness"); (2) integrating agency perspectives and structure perspectives in a single theoretical model—based on the concept of habitus as a structured structure *and* as a structuring structure—that is linked to inequality and stratification and assumes plausible effects from both directions; (3) analysing different forms of capital, especially the role of cultural capital and cultural practices.

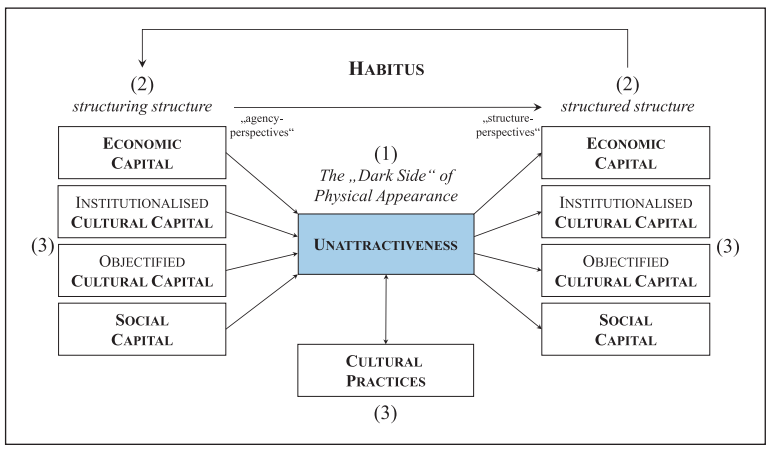

Figure 2. Full theoretical model.

Data and Methods

We use data from the German General Social Survey (ALLBUS), which has been conducted by the German GESIS institute since 1980 collecting data on behavior, attitudes, and the social structure of the German population every two years. Each wave of the ALLBUS consists of the same invariable core module and a changing module that covers special topics, such as political participation or attitudes on inequality, in just that wave. The special focus of the 2014 wave is on cultural practices such as free time activities, media use, and health behaviour. Therefore, this wave of the survey is especially expedient for our analysis. To the best of our knowledge the ALLBUS 2014 is the only available data source that provides a measure of the respondent's physical attractiveness *and* offers comprehensive possibilities to measure not only the different forms of capital but also various cultural practices, such as smoking and drinking behavior as well as reading (books) or visits to the museum and theater. The data collection for the ALLBUS 2014 took place between March and September 2014. The final dataset covers 3471 respondents and is representative of the German population (GESIS, 2015).

The number of missing values in the variables included in the analyses is low (4.9%), and the missing cases do not differ significantly in attractiveness from the rest of the sample. We are thus confident that the exclusion of these cases by listwise deletion does not produce biased results. The final sample consists of 3300 individuals. All variables are weighted to account for the over-sampling of East Germany.

Operationalisation

Unattractiveness of the respondent. Measuring physical appearance is a difficult operation, especially in highly standardised surveys. In the survey at hand, the attractiveness of the respondent is rated by the interviewer on an 11-point scale right before the start of the interview, that is, before the respondent has answered any questions. We reversed scaling according to our theoretical focus, deriving a measure of unattractiveness (from 0 = attractive to 10 = unattractive).

At this point the interviewer has no information about the respondent other than his or her name, as well as a (visual) impression of the neighborhood, of the living situation and, of course, of the respondent him or herself. Interviewers are asked to answer spontaneously according to their first impression.

The global assessment of attractiveness has been criticised as it remains unclear which elements (face, facial expressions, body, posture, gestures or demeanor?, etc.) the interviewers include in their rating of the respondent's attractiveness (Lutz et al., 2013). Recent research—based on full-body photograph and partial cutouts thereof—has shown that even though the ratings of faces and bodies are positively correlated, they do also provide independent information for the overall rating of an individual's attractiveness (Bleske-Rechek et al., 2014; Currie and Little, 2009). Furthermore, combining ratings based on photographs (static) and videotape segments (dynamic), Riggio et al. (1991) show that both static facial beauty and dynamic expressive style, shape overall attractiveness ratings. We thus believe that the interviewer rating as realised within the ALLBUS survey captures a more *true-to-life evaluation* of how others perceive the respondent's attractiveness than would, for example, an evaluation based on one static portrait photo.

Furthermore, interviewer attractiveness ratings have been shown to be biased by gender (Oreffice and Quintana-Domeque, 2016), and age (Frye and Chae, 2017). Therefore, studies suggest that attractiveness should be measured by the average rating of *multiple* raters. This method, called "truth of consensus" (Patzer, 1994: 186), however, proves rather complicated to implement in large-scale population surveys where usually *one* interviewer interviews the respondent face-to-face. Despite the lack of multiple raters, many studies using the same measurements as we do find significant effects of attractiveness which match results from studies relying on multiple raters (see for example Gupta et al., 2016 compared to Hamermesh and Abrevaya, 2013 for happiness, or Pfeifer, 2012 compared to Judge et al., 2009 for income). Rosar et al. (2014: 191–192) even assume that effects found using a somewhat limited attractiveness measurement would only manifest more clearly when based on a superior measurement.

Using the total assessment of attractiveness, it is common (see Ali et al., 2013; Fletcher, 2009; Oreffice and Quintana-Domeque, 2016; Schunck, 2016) to make use of the fact that *one* interviewer usually interviews *multiple respondents.* This allows us to apply interviewer fixed effects, which control for all biases in the attractiveness ratings that are related to constant characteristics of the interviewers, such as age, gender, or education (for a detailed discussion see the subsection on methods).

Economic capital. We operationalise economic capital as the individual net income of the respondent (divided by 1000 for better readability). We replace missing income information with the mean net income of respondents with the same occupational group (using a detailed occupational classification; see Oesch, 2006; Stata syntax provided on request by the authors).

Social capital. We measure social capital as the active involvement in a club or organisation as an active member or in a voluntary position as opposed to passive members or non-members. The variable ranges from 0 (no active involvement) to 3 (active involvement in three or more clubs or organisations).

Forms of cultural capital. *Objectified cultural capital* is measured as the number of books in a household categorised from 0 (0–10 books) to 6 (more than 750 books).

We use the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED, 2011) to operationalise *Institutionalized Cultural Capital*. Institutionalised The ISCED 2011 comprises eight levels of education: (1) primary education, i.e. no school leaving certificate, (2) lower secondary education, i.e. 9–10 years of school (Haupt-, Realschule), (3) upper secondary education, i.e. completed vocational training after lower secondary education, technical college, or university-entrance diploma (berufliche Ausbildung, (Fach-) Abitur), (4) post-secondary education, i.e. completed vocational training after upper secondary education, (5) short-cycle tertiary education, i.e. vocational school diploma or master craftsman's diploma (Fachschulabschluss, Meisterbrief), (6) bachelor's degree or equivalent, regardless of whether they went to university or technical college, (7) master's degree or equivalent, regardless of whether they went to university or technical college, and (8) doctoral degree or equivalent.

Cultural practices. We include the frequency of *physical activities (sport)* on a 5-point scale from "never" to "daily." *Alcohol consumption (drinking)* is operationalised via the frequency of drinking wine and beer on a 7-point scale from "never" to "multiple times daily," *tobacco consumption (smoking)* via the numbers of cigarettes per day categorised with a 9-point scale ranging from "not smoking" to "more than 40 cigarettes a day." Finally, we measure *highbrow cultural participation* as the frequency of reading books and visiting the opera, theatre, museums, and galleries measured on a 5-point-scale from "never" to "daily."

Control variables. We further include a range of socio-demographic control variables: age in years, gender, number of children, family status (single, in a relationship, and separated, which includes separated, divorced, and widowed), migration background (when at least one parent was not born in Germany), region of residence (North, South, West, and East Germany[2]), the level of urbanisation (large/small municipality with less/more than 100,000 inhabitants), and a categorisation of employment status (employed, student, retired, unemployed, house-spouse, and otherwise not employed). We further control for body-mass index, differentiating between underweight (below 18.5), normal weight (18.5 to under 25), overweight (25 to under 30), and adiposity (above 30).

The ALLBUS does not contain any information on respondents' "race" or ethnicity. Both categories are historically and socioculturally highly sensitive terms in Germany and are thus usually not included in population surveys. Although we control for migration background (see earlier), we are therefore not able to control for any related phenotypical characteristic, such as for example skin tone.[3]

Methods

In order to get a general idea of the distribution of measures of physical appearance in Germany, we first provide descriptive statistics on the mean level of unattractiveness overall as well as bivariate analyses of attractiveness by the forms of capital, gender, age, and geographic region.

In quantitative research and especially within the logic of regression analyses it is customary to only test one direction of effects (assuming a possible causal relation). However, this logic would force us to decide between structure and agency perspectives—which is against the basic assumption of our theoretical model (Figure 2). As we do not assume both perspectives as mutually exclusive and expect effects in both directions theoretically, we estimate models for each direction. We first estimate linear regression models of unattractiveness on the forms of capital, cultural practices, and the controls. In a second step, we determine whether unattractiveness impairs the stratification of forms of capital by estimating linear regressions of each form of capital on unattractiveness, the remaining forms of capital, cultural practices, and the control variables. All regressions use cluster-robust standard errors and control for interviewer effects in the rating of the unattractiveness of the respondent using interviewer-fixed effects.[4] The interviewer-fixed effects control for all the characteristics of the interviewer, which do not change between interviews (as might be the case, for example, of the interviewers' mood The estimated coefficients are thus controlled for all observable characteristics of the interviewer—such as age, gender, income, education, etc.—as well as unobservable (habitual) characteristics—such as his or her personal taste.

As outlined in the theoretical section, differences in interviewer-ratings of respondents' attractiveness are interesting findings in themselves. Younger interviewers overall

rate respondents as more unattractive than older interviewers. However, what proves to be most relevant in this regard, is the *relation* of differences between interviewer and respondent.[5] Interviewers rate respondents who are much younger than themselves far less unattractive than respondents who are just slightly younger (Ø 3.07 vs 3.45, $p<0.001$), yet make no significant difference between slightly younger respondents and respondents of the same age (Ø 3.45 vs 3.63, n.s.).

We do not find significant relative differences in the ratings of interviewers in relation to their own sex and the sex of the interviewee. Male and female interviewers rate neither women (Ø 3.34 vs 3.32, n.s.) nor men (Ø 3.54 vs 3.62, n.s.) significantly differently. However, both male and female interviewers rate men as overall less attractive than women.

Regarding education, again it is the relative differences that are most relevant: the higher a respondent's education in relation to the interviewer's education, the more attractive the respondent is rated.

However, all the differences in the interviewer ratings of individuals' attractiveness we find in bivariate analysis diminish when individual level control variables—such as the respondent's age and education—are entered into the multivariate model. This shows that the respondent's characteristics have, overall, a much stronger impact on their perceived attractiveness than the interviewer's age- or education-related rating-biases.

Findings

Descriptive Analyses

Table 1 provides descriptive statistics for all variables used in the analyses. With an average of 3.5 on the unattractiveness scale, the German population is rated as more attractive than unattractive; only 5% of respondents are rated unattractive, with a score of 7 or higher. Economic capital ranges from €0–€60,000 per month (with an average of €1,570 and a median of €1400). The average of institutionalised cultural capital is at ISCED level four, which is post-secondary education. However, more than 50% of the population is below this educational level. The average objectified cultural capital is at around 71–130 books per household. Only around 7–8% of these are bibliophobes (0–10 books) or extreme bibliophiles (more than 750). Finally, with an average of less than one, active engagement in clubs or organisations is rather low. However, 50% of people are actively involved in at least one club, and another 25% are in two or more organisations.

Figure 3 illustrates the relation between unattractiveness and forms of capital. Except for the lowest income quintile—a predominantly young and female and thus more attractive quintile—unattractiveness decreases with increasing economic capital. Regarding institutionalised cultural capital, low education and unattractiveness go hand-in-hand. Beyond reaching the upper secondary educational level, however, accumulation of institutionalised cultural capital has no further effect. With marginal differences, any post-secondary education is a shield from unattractiveness. A similar picture emerges for objectified cultural capital up until a threshold of 750 books. All the same, whether people that are more attractive are more socially active or more socially active people appear more attractive, a lack of social capital relates to physical appearance. At the descriptive level, it seems that overall "the lonely" and "the poor" are indeed less attractive (and vice versa), although economic and social capital are correlated only weakly (see Table 2).

Table 1. Descriptive statistics.

Variable	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Unattractiveness (10 = unattractive)	3.51	(1.75)	0	10
Forms of Capital				
Economic capital (income per 1000 EUR)	1.57	(1.43)	0	60
Institutionalised Cultural Capital (ISCED 2011)	4.11	(1.78)	1	8
Objectified cultural capital (books)	3.08	(1.70)	0	6
Social capital (clubs)	0.92	(0.99)	0	3
Cultural Practices				
Physical activities (4 = daily)	2.03	(1.42)	0	4
Cultural participation (opera, theatre, 3 = daily)	1.19	(0.70)	0	3
Wine and beer consumption (6 = daily)	2.43	(1.72)	0	6
Smoking (8 = 40 cigarettes or more a day)	0.81	(1.50)	0	8
Control Variables				
Gender (1 = Female)	0.49		0	1
Age	49.18	(17.32)	18	91
Migration background	0.19		0	1
Number of children	1.42	(1.29)	0	12
Single	0.27		0	1
Living with a partner	0.56		0	1
Separated/widowed	0.16		0	1
Student	0.05		0	1
Retired	0.25		0	1
Unemployed	0.04		0	1
Housespouse	0.06		0	1
Otherwise not employed	0.03		0	1
Employed	0.57		0	1
North Germany	0.06		0	1
East Germany	0.18		0	1
West Germany	0.45		0	1
South Germany	0.31		0	1
Large municipality (1 = more than 100.000 inhabitants)	0.30		0	1
Underweight	0.02		0	1
Normal weight	0.44		0	1
Overweight	0.36		0	1
Adiposity	0.18		0	1

Note: ALLBUS 2014, weighted means, standard deviations (SD) and minimum/maximum values, $N = 3300$.

Multivariate Analyses

In this section, we estimate linear regression models to first explore the effects of forms of capital, cultural practices, and the controls on unattractiveness (Table 3). In a second step, we determine whether unattractiveness impairs the stratification of forms of capital by estimating linear regressions of each form of capital on unattractiveness, the remaining forms of capital, cultural practices, and the control variables (Table 4).

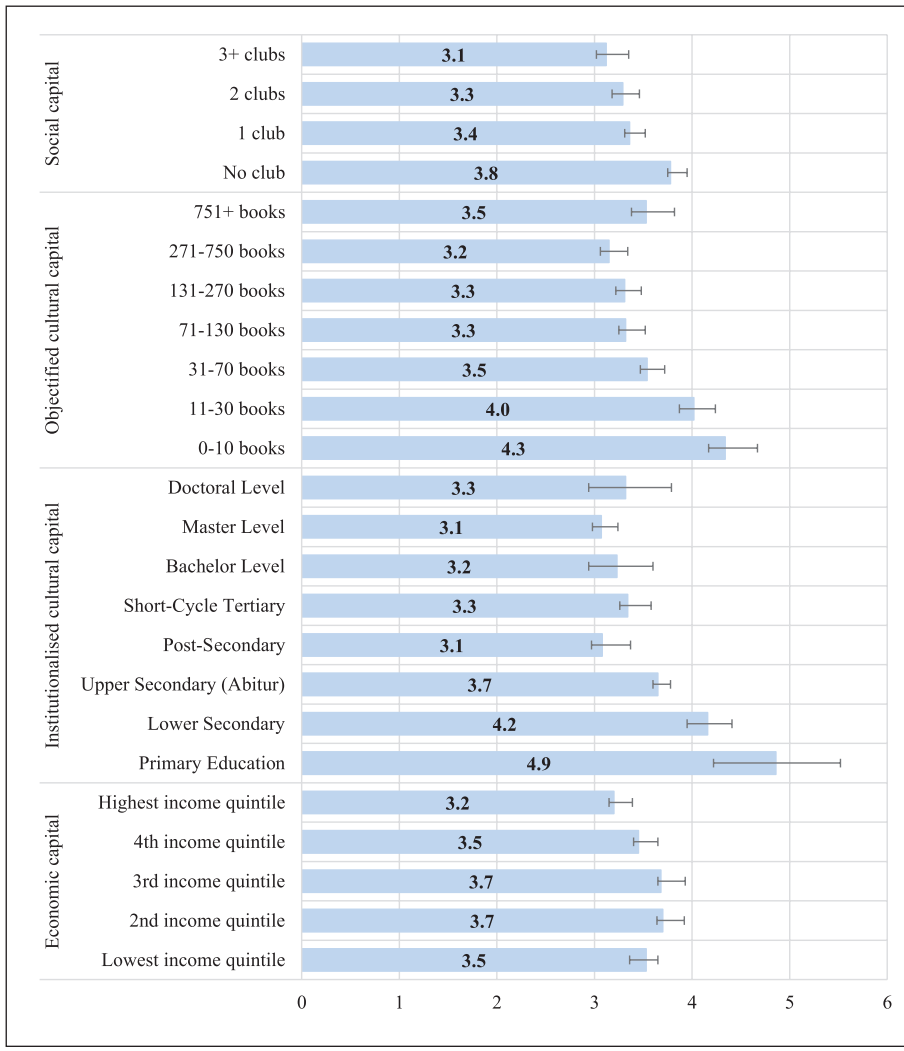

Figure 3. Unattractiveness by forms of capital.
Note: ALLBUS 2014, weighted means with confidence intervals, $N = 3300$.

Model 1 (Table 3) shows that only about 6% of the variance in unattractiveness can be explained by the forms of capital alone. Adding control variables for socio-demographic characteristics (Model 2, $R^2 = .21$) and cultural practices (Model 3, $R^2 = .26$), our final model explains about one quarter of the variance in unattractiveness.

All forms of capital exert a significant diminishing effect on unattractiveness (Model 3). Economic and objectified cultural capital have the strongest impact, followed by social capital and, finally, institutionalised cultural capital. Regarding socio-demographic variables, men are overall considered to be more unattractive than women.

Table 2. Correlations between unattractiveness and the forms of capital.

	Unattractiveness	Economic capital	Institutionalised cultural capital	Objectified cultural capital
Economic capital	–.076***			
Institutionalised cultural capital	–.172***	0.298***		
Objectified cultural capital	–.158***	.185***	.423***	
Social capital	–.127***	.073***	.177***	.234***

Note: Pearson's Correlations, * $p<.05$, ** $p<.01$, *** $p<.001$. ALLBUS 2014, $N = 3{,}300$.

Compared to people in a relationship, the separated, widowed, and singles are considered relatively unattractive. This is not self-evident, as agency perspectives would expect that singles invest more in their physical appearance as they are actively engaged in the "partner market." On the other hand, it is equally likely that singles are less attractive as a result of a successful partner selection in the past and therefore confirms the assumption that less attractive individuals are less successful on the partner market.

Aside from unemployment, which heightens individuals' unattractiveness score by more than half a point, none of the employment statuses exert an influence on people's attractiveness. Interestingly, strong regional-geographic differences appear, while unattractiveness does not differ between larger cities and the countryside (which is an important marker of social differentiation in German society). When controlling for socio-demographic variables in the multivariate models, people from North and South Germany are less likely to be rated unattractive by comparison to their East-German fellow citizens. While there are in fact differences in physical appearance between the regions (e.g. people in the North are taller on average, etc.), a macro-level effect (e.g. GDP of regions) is equally likely. Although we are not able to investigate these effects at this point, further research on such regional differences below the nation state seems worthwhile in this regard.

Beyond people's capital and socio-demographic characteristics, unattractiveness is still influenced by cultural practices. Individuals who practice sports are perceived as less unattractive. Going to a theater or museum, significantly reduces people's unattractiveness. Interestingly, the consumption of beer and wine is similarly effective against unattractiveness, whereas smoking takes a toll on how attractive people appear. Finally, while any BMI above normal weight translates into more unattractiveness, being underweight is neither rewarded nor penalised.

Turning to the effects of unattractiveness on forms of capital, we use the same set of variables as in the three models in Table 3 but with each of the forms of capital as dependent variables (Table 4). The results of both analyses are summarised in Figure 4. Note that the cross-sectional design of the study implies that when a form of capital exerts an influence on attractiveness, attractiveness automatically exerts the same influence on that form of capital. Thus, no causal interpretation can be drawn from our results.

Table 4 shows the negative effect of unattractiveness on each form of capital independently of the other forms of capital. Two aspects stand out in this context: first, the negative effect of unattractiveness is stable and significant for all forms of capital when controlling for other forms of capital, cultural practices, and the control variables. This

Table 3. Linear regressions of attractiveness on forms of capital and cultural practices with interviewer fixed effects.

	Model 1			*Model 2*			*Model 3*		
	b	se	beta	b	se	beta	b	se	beta
Forms of Capital									
Economic capital (per 1000 EUR)	−.054**	(.02)	−.047	−.079*	(.03)	−.069	−.070*	(.03)	−.061
Institutionalised cultural capital (ISCED 2011)	−.104***	(.02)	−.105	−.092***	(.02)	−.093	−.045*	(.02)	−.046
Objectified cultural capital (books)	−.098***	(.02)	−.094	−.103***	(.02)	−.099	−.069***	(.02)	−.067
Social capital (clubs)	−.156***	(.03)	−.087	−.134***	(.03)	−.074	−.065*	(.03)	−.036
Control Variables									
Gender (ref.: male)				–.371***	(.06)	−.106	–.296***	(.06)	−.084
Age				.033***	(.00)	.322	.030***	(.00)	.300
Number of children				.032	(.03)	.023	.006	(.03)	.005
Migration background (ref.: none)				–.001	(.07)	.000	–.048	(.07)	−.010
Civil status (ref.: married)									
Single				.400***	(.08)	.102	.424***	(.08)	.108
Separated/widowed				.179*	(.07)	.037	.152*	(.07)	.032
Employment status (ref.: employed)									
Student				–.114	(.12)	−.014	.029	(.12)	.004
Retired				.115	(.09)	.029	.132	(.09)	.033
Unemployed				.742***	(.13)	.089	.624***	(.13)	.075
Housespouse				.295	(.16)	.037	.267	(.15)	.033
Otherwise not employed				.317	(.18)	.032	.303	(.18)	.030

(Continued)

Table 3. (Continued)

	Model 1			*Model 2*			*Model 3*		
	b	se	beta	b	se	beta	b	se	beta
Region in Germany (ref.: East Germany)									
North Germany				−1.221***	(.23)	−.153	−1.137***	(.26)	−.142
West Germany				–.794***	(.13)	−.218	–.814***	(.16)	−.224
South Germany				−1.106***	(.32)	−.274	−1.083***	(.29)	−.268
Large municipality (ref: <100,000 inhab.)				–.099	(.18)	−.026	–.125	(.18)	−.032
Body mass index (ref.: normal weight)									
Underweight							.186	(.21)	.015
Overweight							.226***	(.06)	.062
Adiposity							.660***	(.08)	.144
Cultural Practices									
Physical activities							–.133***	(.02)	−.108
Cultural participation (opera, theatre)							–.108*	(.04)	−.043
Wine and beer consumption							–.047**	(.01)	−.046
Smoking							.061***	(.02)	.051
Constant	4.412***	(.08)		3.353***	(.19)		3.357***	(.22)	
R-squared within model	.06			.21			.26		
R-squared overall model	.04			.06			.09		
R-squared between model	.02			.00			.00		

Note: * $p<.05$, ** $p<.01$, *** $p<.001$, ALLBUS *2014*, N = 3,300, *cluster-robust standard errors in parentheses.*

Table 4. Linear regressions of forms of capital on attractiveness and cultural practices with interviewer fixed effects.

	Economic capital			*Institutionalised cultural capital*			*Objectified cultural capital*			*Social capital*		
	b	se	beta	b	se	beta	b	se	beta	b	se	beta
Unattractiveness	−.072***	(.02)	−.082	−.053*	(.02)	−.052	−.069**	(.02)	−.072	−.029*	(.01)	−.052
Forms of Capital												
Economic capital (per 1000 EUR)				.173	(.12)	.150	.051***	(.01)	.047	−.016	(.01)	−.026
Institutionalised cultural capital (ISCED 2011)	.152***	(.03)	.176				.207***	(.02)	.218	.024*	(.01)	.043
Objectified cultural capital (books)	.053	(.03)	.058	.243***	(.02)	.232				.047***	(.01)	.082
Social capital (clubs)	−.038	(.03)	−.024	.062*	(.03)	.034	.106***	(.02)	.061			
Control Variables												
Gender (ref.: male)	−.635***	(.06)	−.206	−.334**	(.10)	−.094	.085	(.06)	.025	−.103**	(.03)	−.053
Age	.013***	(.00)	.145	.000	(.00)	.004	.008**	(.00)	.084	−.002	(.00)	−.042
Number of children	−.008	(.02)	−.007	−.029	(.02)	−.020	.059*	(.02)	.044	.042*	(.02)	.055
Migration background (ref.: none)	−.057	(.05)	−.014	.058	(.08)	.012	−.427***	(.07)	−.094	−.218***	(.04)	−.083
Civil status (ref.: married)												
Single	−.175*	(.09)	−.051	−.256**	(.09)	−.064	−.285***	(.08)	−.075	−.077	(.05)	−.035
Separated/widowed	.069	(.04)	.016	−.100	(.07)	−.021	−.512***	(.07)	−.111	−.062	(.04)	−.023
Employment status (ref.: employed)												
Student	−1.043***	(.07)	−.148	−.660**	(.20)	−.081	.166	(.13)	.022	−.023	(.09)	−.005
Retired	−.820***	(.09)	−.233	−.261*	(.12)	−.064	−.052	(.08)	−.014	.053	(.06)	.024
Unemployed	−.880***	(.08)	−.120	−.123	(.17)	−.015	−.161	(.13)	−.020	−.036	(.07)	−.008
Housespouse	−1.105***	(.07)	−.157	−.533**	(.19)	−.066	.076	(.11)	.010	.002	(.07)	.000
Otherwise not employed	−.899***	(.10)	−.102	−.360	(.21)	−.036	−.053	(.16)	−.005	.105	(.09)	.019
Region in Germany (ref.: East Germany)												
North Germany	.180	(.16)	.026	−.894	(.51)	−.111	.406	(.56)	.053	.690*	(.28)	.155
West Germany	.092	(.07)	.029	−.118	(.39)	−.032	.454	(.41)	.130	.679***	(.06)	.335
South Germany	.017	(.10)	.005	.189	(.43)	.046	.176	(.45)	.045	.749***	(.15)	.334

(Continued)

Table 4. (Continued)

	Economic capital			*Institutionalised cultural capital*			*Objectified cultural capital*			*Social capital*		
	b	se	beta	b	se	beta	b	se	beta	b	se	beta
Large municipality (ref: <100,000 inhab.)	–.221	(.19)	–.065	.545***	(.16)	.139	–.232	(.22)	–.062	–.073	(.10)	–.034
Body mass index (ref.: normal weight)												
Underweight	.041	(.13)	.004	–.124	(.19)	–.010	.135	(.20)	.011	–.094	(.12)	–.013
Overweight	.040	(.06)	.012	–.123*	(.06)	–.033	–.071	(.05)	–.020	.049	(.03)	.024
Adiposity	.051	(.05)	.013	–0.264***	(.06)	–.057	.100	(.07)	.023	.070	(.04)	.028
Cultural Practices												
Physical activities	.036*	(.02)	.033	.054*	(.02)	.043	.019	(.02)	.016	.139***	(.01)	.202
Cultural participation (opera, theatre)	–.014	(.05)	–.006	.499***	(.05)	.196	.848***	(.05)	.350	.159***	(.03)	.114
Wine and beer consumption	.007	(.02)	.008	.041*	(.02)	.040	.016	(.02)	.017	.019	(.01)	.034
Smoking	–.015	(.01)	–.014	–.099***	(.02)	–.082	–.003	(.02)	–.003	–.031**	(.01)	–.047
Constant	1.070***	(.20)		2.921***	(.37)		.748*	(.32)		–.039	(.14)	
R-squared within model	.23			.30			.35			.14		
R-squared overall model	.22			.31			.36			.12		
R-squared between model	.22			.34			.47			.16		

*Note: * p<.05, ** p<.01, *** p<.001*, ALLBUS *2014, N = 3,300, cluster-robust standard errors in parentheses.*

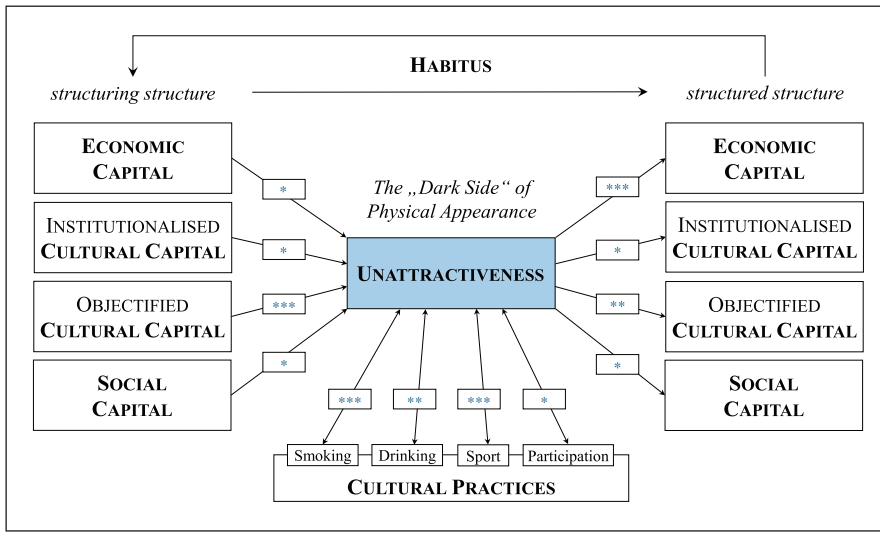

Figure 4. Theoretical model with empirical effects.
Note: * $p<.05$, ** $p<.01$, *** $p<.001$, ALLBUS 2014, $N = 3{,}300$.

confirms the fundamental sociological relevance of physical appearance for social stratification, independently of socio-demographic characteristics.

Second, the models with the two forms of cultural capital as dependent variables are those with the highest explanatory power ($R^2 = .30$ and .35) and show significant negative effects of unattractiveness on cultural capital. This suggests that unattractiveness is related to cultural factors. Thus, one's physical appearance should be considered more systematically in cultural sociology.

Gender differences. In the theoretical section, we outlined that the perspective of erotic capital suggested by Hakim (2010) stresses fundamental gender differences concerning physical appearance. At first glance, our data validate some of these basic assumptions: (1) on average, women are rated significantly less unattractive than men; (2) overall, women have accumulated less capital than men; and (3), the multivariate analysis (with gender as a control variable) showed that capital may help to improve one's physical appearance (Table 3). Therefore, the assumption that women may use their superior physical appearance to counteract their lower social position has at least some plausibility. However, as we further investigate this aspect by conducting additional analyses separately for women and men, the evidence does not support this assumption. On the contrary, when analysed separately, the results show that the effects we found in our general models largely stem from the male group. Analysing the female group, we only find significant effects for the relation between unattractiveness and objectified cultural capital (and vice versa).

Figure 5 presents the empirical effects by gender. Detailed analyses (not displayed) show that each of the cultural practices turn the effects of the

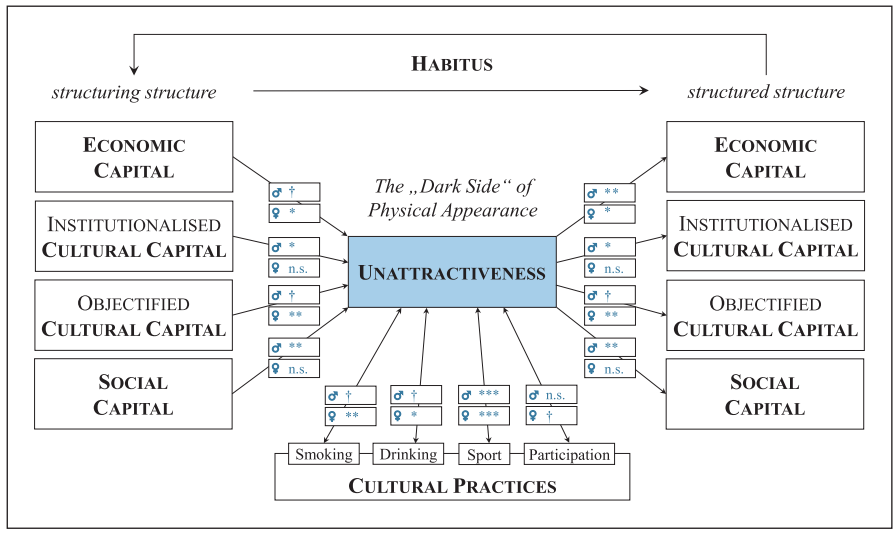

Figure 5. Theoretical model with empirical effects by gender.
Note: † $p<.10$, * $p<.05$, ** $p<.01$, *** $p<.001$, ALLBUS 2014, $N = 3{,}300$.

forms of capitals statistically insignificant. For men, the significant dampening effect of objectified cultural capital on unattractiveness diminishes once we control for cultural participation. For women, social capital only affects unattractiveness when their physical activities are controlled for. The significant dampening effect of women's institutionalised cultural capital is fully absorbed by a combination of physical activities and cultural participation. Surprisingly, women's income only exerts an influence on their physical appearance before entering cultural capital.

In general, the findings indicate a possible gender bias in this field of research, which focuses too much on the relevance of physical attractiveness for women. Instead, our data clearly show that avoiding unattractiveness is important for both genders and it seems to be even more important for men. A detailed analysis of these gender differences would exceed the scope of this article. However, we suggest that future studies should not only control for gender but rather conduct systematic group comparisons.

Limitations of the Study

Some limitations of the study must be mentioned.

Direction of effects. Although effects from both directions seem plausible from our theoretical perspective, panel data would be necessary to explore which direction is possibly more influential and to clarify the relation between both the effects of stratification on physical appearance and the effects of appearance on stratification.

International comparison. As our analysis is based on a special dataset from the German General Social Survey (ALLBUS) (ALLBUS, 2014 – GESIS, 2015), our conclusions are

restricted to one country. Of course, cultural differences between countries can be expected (e.g. see Jones, 2008 for the globalisation of beauty norms and Delhey et al., 2017 for cross-cultural differences regarding sociocultural inequalities) to influence the relation between cultural practices, forms of (cultural) capital, and physical appearance. Therefore, cross-cultural comparison of our findings could help clarify some of the mechanisms analysed in this study.

Cultural practices. The dataset we used is special as it includes a module on cultural practices *and* a measurement of respondents' unattractiveness. However, the number of cultural practices that are suitable for the analysis of unattractiveness according to our theoretical model is still limited (i.e. physical activities, smoking, drinking alcohol, and highbrow cultural participation). Particularly, indicators for practices of "doing beauty" are missing and could possibly add another layer of understanding to our theoretical and empirical analyses.

Conclusions

This article has investigated the relations between forms of capital, cultural practices and the perception of physical appearance. From a critical discussion of some recent approaches in this area of research, we developed a theoretical framework for the analysis of unattractiveness based on the cultural sociology of Pierre Bourdieu. Three aspects stand out from this perspective:

(1) We focus on the "dark side of physical appearance" by analysing the possible social penalties of unattractiveness.
(2) The majority of the research in this area focused on the effects of physical appearance on stratification. Recently, studies have focused on agency and the effects of stratification on physical appearance as well. We integrate both perspectives within our theoretical framework and investigate both directions empirically.
(3) Finally, we highlight the role of cultural factors, especially cultural capital and cultural practices, in the analysis of physical appearance.

Our study shows that physical appearance is linked to social stratification. Regarding unattractiveness as a dependent variable, all forms of capital (but especially institutionalised and objectified cultural capital) significantly decrease unattractiveness. The cultural practices of highbrow cultural participation (reading, theater, opera), physical activities, and (surprisingly) drinking alcohol decrease unattractiveness, while smoking has negative effects on one's physical appearance. These effects are stable even when controlling for many socio-demographic variables and other forms of capital. Beyond these effects, being single or separated is associated with being less attractive.

Regarding the forms of capital as dependent variables, unattractiveness decreases the accumulation of all forms of capital. The effects are stable and significant independently of socio-demographic characteristics and cultural practices. Taken together, we find clear associations between physical appearance and forms of capital (and vice versa). While previous studies have largely focused on the effects of attractiveness on economic capital

("not being poor"), social capital or the partner market ("not being lonely"), the relation between cultural factors and physical appearance has received less attention. Our study shows that forms of cultural capital and cultural practices should be included in the analysis of physical appearance and that physical appearance should receive more attention in cultural sociology.

It seems that the evaluation of one's physical appearance must be conceptualised within a broader system of cultural classifications. Therefore, cultural sociology should further elaborate on the role of physical appearance in cultural spheres, especially focusing on cross-cultural differences in the nexus of unattractiveness, cultural capital and stratification.

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Notes

1. Bourdieu (1984: 193) notes: "Thus one can begin to map out a universe of class bodies, which (biological accidents apart) tends to reproduce in its specific logic the universe of the social structure . . . Thus, bodies would have every likelihood of receiving a value strictly corresponding to the positions of their owners in the distribution of the other fundamental properties–but for the fact that the logic of social heredity sometimes endows those least endowed in all other respects with the rarest bodily properties, such as beauty."
2. Because of the political division of Germany until 1989, a regional division beyond the East-West gap is still uncommon. According to the categorisation of Schneickert (2015: 162), we differentiate between North, East, West, and South Germany.
3. Research shows that elements related to race and ethnicity, such as skin tone (Frisby, 2006), can play a role in how physical attractiveness is perceived by others. However, studies examining perceptions of attractiveness across raters and people from different cultural groups find only small differences depending on cultural preferences for facial features of the own cultural group (Cunningham et al., 1995) or on the familiarity of the raters with the facial features of subjects they have to evaluate (Coetzee et al., 2014). Overall, research points towards a cross-cultural perception of attractiveness, which is influenced less by ethnic or racial features (Singh and Luis, 1995) and more by the perceptions of attractiveness predominant in the country where people are primarily socialised (Tovée et al., 2006).
4. A total of 181 interviewers each rated between one and 91 interviewees. Most interviewees (94%) were rated by an interviewer who rated at least 10 participants.
5. To analyse the relational differences, we construct five comparison groups: Interviewers who are (1) much older, (2) slightly older, (3) about the same age, (4) slightly younger, and (5) much younger than the respondent. We define coevals as respondents who are no more than 10% younger or older than the interviewer. A second group of younger/older respondents includes respondents who are more than 10% of the interviewer's age, younger or older, but not more than 20%. Finally, the much younger or older age group then includes respondents who are more than 20% younger or older than the interviewer. That is, for a 30-year-old

interviewer, the age groups would then be <24 years (much younger), 24–27 (younger), 27–33 (coevals), 33–36 (older), >36 (much older) and for a 60-year-old interviewer, the age groups would be <48 years (much younger), 48–54 (younger), 54–66 (coevals), 66–72 (older), >72 (much older).

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